

Class is Race: Brexit and the Popular Will

In 1915 influential jurist Albert Venn Dicey (1915) defined parliamentary sovereignty as “the right to make or unmake any law whatever”, and whereby “no person or body” would have the right to “override or set aside the legislation of Parliament”. The nature of this legislative sovereignty underwrites Britain’s “unwritten” constitution. However, when the British public voted by 51.9% to leave the EU, influential politicians and pundits claimed that the non-binding referendum result was an expression of the popular will. The government, they argued, was bound to legislate on this paramount will, even over and against the sovereignty of parliament.

During the first Conservative Party conference following the referendum, new Prime Minister Theresa May (2016) commanded her government to “respect what the people told us on the 23rd of June – and take Britain out of the European Union.” When, in November, the High Court of Justice ruled that Parliament had to legislate on Brexit, the right-wing Daily Mail (the most popular British newspaper online and in print) accused the judiciary of being “enemies of the people” (Phipps 2016). The Justice Secretary, Liz Truss, was noticeably slow to defend the judges. Meanwhile, Nigel Farage, leader of the influential euro-sceptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), warned that a 100,000 strong “people’s army” would march on the Supreme Court (Payton 2016).

But who, exactly, is morally worthy to count as “the people”? Pouring scorn on the European parliament just days after the referendum, Farage (2016) argued that Brexit was the will of the “little people”. And in describing what she envisaged to be Britain’s post-EU “shared society”, May (2017) explicitly placed the “ordinary working class” as its prime deserving constituency. One might further ask, though: what counts as ordinary? When contextualising May’s statement within the political and intellectual discourse of the last ten years, it is difficult not to reasonably conclude that the “ordinary” is first and foremost white (see in general G. K. Bhambra 2016; Tilley 2017; Sayer 2017; Roediger 2017).

In this short think-piece, I want to make the following provocations: class is race; the popular will has imperial legacies; and so, the Left needs to be extremely careful in channelling that will to address social justice. In making these provocations I will present some of the imperial genealogy of the “white working class”. By these means, I will address the editors’ claim that the present moment is defined in part by a lack of analysis regarding the global ramifications of upheavals such as Brexit etc.

Recent work in historical sociology has significantly qualified the diffusionist approach to international history whereby a phenomenon emerges ready-formed in a discrete locale (usually Europe or the West) and subsequently dissipates globally (Gurminder K Bhambra 2014; Go and Lawson 2018). To the contrary, global ramifications usually proceed from phenomena that have already evolved (through) global constellations. I would maintain that over the last five hundred years, these constellations have arisen predominantly with imperialism marking the distance and proximity between metropole/colony, colony/colony, and metropole/metropole. By this way of thinking, a significant number of notable phenomena, seemingly national in their delineation, have in fact been constitutively imperial in a world of imperialisms.

In this respect, I want to pick up on a critique made by Rob Walker in his contribution to this collection of interventions. Problematising the way in which politics is attenuated to the internal constitution of particularised subjects, Walker critiques the practices of methodological internationalism, nationalism and individualism. To my mind, what draws these three together is an epistemological premise that the act of comparison brings worldly knowledge. In fact, to a

comparativist, my focus on British politics as a method to explicate meaning in global upheavals might be considered parochial at best, bad faith at worst. Comparison can certainly produce useful knowledge. But, as Walker intonates, the comparative method is not innocent. It came to prominence in the Cold War, during the era of decolonization, as a way to frame issues raised by modernization theory and the development project. Comparison naturalised the nation/state as the ontological foundation of international relations, even when the vast majority of nations/states being investigated had been constituted through imperial – and racialized – rule. In fine, to compare was to epistemologically bracket out the constitutive character of empire, colonialism and race in global order (see variously Weber 2007; Bilgin and Morton 2002; Jones 2008; Thompson 2015).

Therefore, I want to resist a rush to the comparative as a method for identifying the global coordinates of present-day upheavals. And I want to suggest that slowing down and contemplating imperial legacies could be a more edifying strategy. The seemingly provincial might be no less global than the comparative. One could say that it is less a case of focusing on the particular and more a case of dwelling in the relational. In this spirit, I will now contextualise Brexit's "popular will" through its imperial and racialized constellation.

The "white working class" reappeared as a category of British public debate during 2008, a time when the ruling Labour party was struggling to deal with the fallout from the global financial crisis. Prior to the crisis, a disquiet had already grown over the celebration of an increasingly multicultural public sphere when at the same time economic inequalities remained stubbornly embedded in Britain's "indigenous" class structure (Kenny 2012, 23). In 2008 a "White Season" of programs broadcasted on the BBC. The season controversially gave voice to a sense of unfairness amongst white self-identifying members of the working class vis-à-vis the positive discrimination in law and welfare purportedly enjoyed by Britain's Black and minority ethnic populations (Rhodes 2010, 83).

During the same year, and looking ahead to elections, the Fabian Society hosted a fringe meeting at the Labour Party conference, which sought an answer to the question: "can we give the white working class what they want?" (Sveinsson 2009, 4) Meanwhile, Priti Patel, immigration minister at the time, argued that skills shortages should be met by better equipping Britain's "indigenous population" (Moore 2008). One year later Hazel Blears, then Communities Secretary, acknowledged that lower-income white people felt that their "acute fears" over immigration had been ignored (Reid 2009). In fact, in the closing months of the election campaign in 2010, Labour palpably began to re-embrace a class position with this in mind (BBC 2010).

The "white working class" was especially referenced in debates over education, a proxy for social mobility. Back in 2008 a Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills report that primarily addressed gender gaps in higher education was seized upon by (especially right-leaning) newspapers for its brief mention of the relative lack of white working class boys attending university (Paton 2008; see also Gillborn 2010). In 2013, David Willets, at the time universities minister, suggested that when it came to higher education white working class boys should be targeted in the same way as other "disadvantaged groups" by the Office for Fair Access (Silverman 2013). In March 2016, three months before the referendum date, Liam Fox, a Conservative MP fallen from grace but soon to become a key Brexit minister in Theresa May's government, opined: "Everyone talks about the need for diversity and yet nobody seems to worry about poor white boys. We need to stop obsessing with particular minorities" (Charlotte Street Partners 2016).

What can we make of these recent currents in political debate? It should be remembered that in the years preceding the global financial crisis, class was rarely spoken of or legislated on directly, but rather, through proxy concepts such as "social exclusion" (Griffith and Glennie 2014). The mainstream discussion of class over the last eight or so years has addressed first and foremost

the grievances of the indigenous/ordinary whites who have been unfairly “left behind” by neoliberal globalization (Garner 2012; Rhodes 2010; Ford and Goodwin 2014). The point, then, is that in Britain class - and concern for class inequality - has returned to the diet of public discourse as a constitutively racialized category – as the white-working-class.

Returned from where, though? From a non-racialized, pristine condition? From a national constituency, indigenous to Britain? To address these questions via the provocations that I started this think-piece with, I want to take a short excursion into inter-war social anthropology and its relationship to post-war race relations scholarship.

In the 1920s the British government made an express commitment to develop its colonies, especially its African possessions, in order to strengthen an increasingly fragile imperial economy. But colonial development intensified colonial urbanization. Social anthropologists focused their perceptions of this phenomenon upon Britain’s settler colonies, especially the Rhodesias and South Africa, wherein the growth of mining towns featured centrally in the evolving Apartheid division of labour (see for example Gluckman 1947). Bronislaw Malinowski, professor at the London School of Economic and perhaps the most influential social anthropologist of the period, shared these concerns and interests (see especially 1945). He argued that the process of urbanization detribalized the African as it introduced him to a social world of superior values and material organization. Malinowski further noted how the Europeanizing African experienced urban “colour bars” that prevented him from taking his rightful occupational place in civilized society. In Malinowski’s estimation, this promise-yet-denial of social improvement produced reactionary forms of tribal and pan-African nationalism that were destabilizing to empire’s integrity.

Very soon after the war’s end, a programme of social anthropology at Edinburgh University began to seamlessly weave concerns of colonial development into the study of “race relations” in Britain (see for example Little 1954). The latter had emerged as a “problem” due to the increase of colonial citizens residing in Britain and providing labour for reconstruction. At Edinburgh, social anthropologists effectively transposed the rural-to-urban problematique of colonial development to a colony-to-urban-metropole problematique of Black integration. Michael Banton, an incredibly influential race relations scholar to emerge from Edinburgh, described the experience of colonial citizens coming up against informal colour bars in the same way as Malinowski, and with the same destabilizing effects:

“the slights, rebuffs and discrimination - real and imagined - which [Black citizens] experience [through the informal colour bar] may afterwards cause a reaction of resentment and may lead to a rejection of British cultural values and to political nationalism” (Banton 1953b, 59).

Thus, the post-war problematising of British race relations was a surrogate to the problem of colonial development, which itself was framed in terms of challenges to the racialized imperial division of labour. I hasten to add that all these intellectual currents were directly (albeit complexly) streamed into public debate.

By the late 1960s the British study of race relations was drastically challenged by the arrival of the Black Power movement. Black Power was met by many young Black scholars and activists, and woven into existing traditions of struggle transmitted through Commonwealth genealogies, especially Caribbean and South Asian. Prevailing concerns for the orderly integration of non-white commonwealth peoples into British economy and society were henceforth challenged by a critical focus on the structural racism of that society and its imperial coordinates (see Allen and Smith 1974). For instance, commenting upon racism in English trade unions, Black activist and Pan-Africanist Cecil Gutzmore argued in 1973 that:

The white working class tend to be more or less willing agents of the ruling class in regard to blacks, which is precisely why one section of the working class finds it is necessary to use industrial action against another (Bailey 1973).

By the early 1980s the Institute of Race Relations had transformed from being a liberal (and weak) arm of empire into an ideologically radical organization. Its new journal, *Race and Class*, became a key forum for discussing the white working class and its hierarchical relationship to the black working classes within British imperialism.

Now fast forward to the 2010s. These extant debates have been erased by contemporary retrievals of the “white working class”. This category is now rendered in common-sense as an indigenous constituency, particular to itself, innocent of colonial pasts, independent of imperial divisions of labour. Pundits and politicians alike bemoan how this constituency has been unfairly left-behind by their own metropolitan elites as they pander to the demands of multi-coloured newcomers. But contra colonial aphasia, and given the short genealogy I have just recounted, I want to assert that there is no unsullied category of class that exists before being racialized within the imperial division of labour. Consequently, any mobilization of the current “popular will” in the service of social justice for the (white-)working class will also have to reckon with the legacy of empire.

This provocation has not only academic but political import in the Brexit era. Public debate since the EU referendum has almost entirely obscured the diverse constituencies of working peoples in Britain. For instance, in the current political lexicon Black citizens appear only in terms of victims of or aggressors in the criminal justice system, and Muslim citizens only as victims of Islamophobia or suspects of terrorism. It is almost as if it does not matter that Black and minority ethnic communities – especially their women – have in relative terms been most detrimentally impacted by austerity measures over the last ten years (“New Research Shows That Poverty, Ethnicity and Gender Magnify the Impact of Austerity on BME Women” 2016).

The genealogy that I have sketched above suggests that race is fundamental to political economy. But at present, it is as if race is only allowed to articulate with political discrimination; while economic inequality is a class issue to which race is safely derivative of. And remember: the popular will for Brexit is presently being enunciated as a moral compulsion primarily in the language of inequality rather than discrimination. Does it not matter that Black voters overwhelmingly cast a ballot to remain, and that Britain’s Black citizens are significantly more likely to live in poverty than their white counterparts?

Always be suspicious when the Right invokes the moral significance of the popular will and claims to do its bidding. The Left: beware. It is tempting to think that the Right’s attachment of class to the popular will might finally allow for a leveraging of social justice into the unyielding halls of parliamentary sovereignty. But to presume the motility of such a progressive force, one would have to fantasise class removed from its racial constitution and imperial constellation. To claim, in terms given by the present conjuncture, that a progressive opening could be sought through/despite Brexit is at best naïve and at worst wilfully irresponsible. Note that Jeremy Corbyn’s electoral success was predicated upon a strategic deferral of the question of immigration.

A comparison of different white working classes across the Atlantic and beyond will certainly produce useful knowledge. But a rush to comparison might at the same time obscure the deeper constitution of class as race. An imperial genealogy of the white working class can open the vista onto the global coordinates and ramifications of our current upheavals. I don’t know what errant journey awaits us, but I do know we should not take short-cuts.

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